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Why Is College Foreign-Language Instruction in Trouble? Three Dozen Reasons.

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Thirty-six problem areas relating to college foreign language instruction are identified in this paper. Most of these problems can be grouped in five major categories--(1) high school preparation and college entrance requirements and placement procedures, (2) faculty training, qualifications, and interests, (3) research needs and the lag between the development of theory and its practical application, (4) poor coordination of classroom, language laboratory, and teaching materials as well as insufficient integration of cultural concepts, and (5) unrealistic objectives pertaining to student attitudes, undergraduate and graduate school requirements, priority disagreements, program articulation, and concomitant growth of student bodies and faculty. Also mentioned are changes needed in innovative and evaluative practices, the deterioration in college of language skills acquired in high school, and the problems involved with age and language learning. (AF)

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WHY IS COLLEGE FOREIGN-LANGUAGE INSTRUCTION IN TROUBLE?[1]

THREE DOZEN REASONS

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1. Knowledge of a foreign language might well be viewed as propaedeutic to college study, a set of skills to be enhanced and utilized in college after years of earlier training. However, many students start foreign language (FL) study in college, and 50 percent of American colleges have no FL entrance requirement.

2. As secondary and college education is extended to ever-increasing numbers of students at state and community schools, the preparation and potential of those students in college FL courses is ever decreasing, especially at those schools without an FL entrance requirement.

3. Those students who start FL study in college come ill-prepared for the different demands made by FL study and "subject matter" study on the modes of learning and skills needed to succeed. Indeed, the criteria for success in high school (and thus for college admission) disfavor the student who is more adept at skill learning, less adept at "subject matter" learning, thus providing a population of college FL students who are selectively inept at the performances to be taught.

4. The quality of high school FL training is poor and uneven. The general rule of placement that one year of FL training in high school equals one semester in college is damning but too generous.

5. As the predominant methodology for FL instruction in high schools shifts gradually from grammar and translation to audio-lingual methods, the students admitted to the colleges have very uneven FL competencies.

6. Procedures for placing entering students at the appropriate course level are not valid. For example, there is an important difference between the student who has just finished his high school FL study and those with one year (13 percentile points down) and two years (20 percentile points down)

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intervening, but this difference is generally ignored in placement on the basis of years of study. Placement on the basis of test scores encounters a related difficulty, since the student who studied FL some years prior and scores poorly because of disuse will progress more rapidly in college FL study than a student with the same score who has just finished his high school study. In addition, the tests leave much to be desired in predictive accuracy and in reliability.

7. Students do not really expect to acquire the skill of speaking and using the foreign language that they are studying in the formal school situation.

8. There is much anecdote and a little evidence supporting the belief that language learning has a "critical period" of facilitation, related to the physiological development of the nervous system and tapering off around puberty. If so, our colleges are offering FL instruction to a group whose maximum receptivity for that instruction has passed.

9. Admission to the faculty of an FL department requires a degree that demands neither training nor competence in FL teaching.

10. College FL courses are taught or coordinated by professors who have been selected because of their expertise in other areas and who are more interested in teaching in those other areas.

11. Graduate students dominate college level FL teaching in large universities. However, the typical department offers no training courses for these teaching fellows, no visiting procedures, no supervision.

12. The teaching fellowship is a language department's way of subsidizing needy graduate students that it wants to admit for reasons unrelated to undergraduate instruction. Teaching fellows are viewed as a necessary evil to discharge a necessary and evil duty -- elementary FL instruction.

13. Most FL teaching fellows are concurrently studying literature; the skills they are developing in their graduate courses and the implicit values of their departments are not such as to enhance their teaching of introductory FL.

14. There is a grievous time lag between changes in theory and practice in the underlying sciences -- e.g., psychology and linguistics -- and the impact of these changes on methods and materials for FL instruction.

15. Advances in linguistics and applied linguistics since World War II have only partially affected the materials actually employed in teaching. A

recent survey found that only 30 percent of colleges use materials in FL instruction based on modern structural linguistics, and this percentage is probably inflated.

16. When innovations do penetrate FL instruction -- e.g., programmed instruction, or the language laboratory -- they are often injected and rejected for extraneous reasons; their adoption is rarely tailored, never monitored systematically, and hence not adjusted *in situ*.

17. Innumerable questions of teaching strategy are unresolved by research findings, so the methodology of FL instruction has little scientific base.

18. Present methodology makes little or no provision for differences among students, although these differences may be the single most important variable in determining FL achievement. Present instructional methods in FL do not allow for different learning styles, preferred sensory modalities, rates of acquisition, kinds of motivation, and entering behaviors of students.

19. "Student aptitude" is the *deus ex machina* that provides a happy ending to an otherwise tragic story of FL instruction. It is an excuse for inadequate methods and materials. A good aptitude test would put the blame where it lies, yet one of sufficient reliability and validity has not been widely employed.

20. There is poor coordination between what is trained in the classroom and what is trained in the language laboratory.

21. Classroom instruction is supplemented, if at all, by repetitive drills.

22. Language laboratories are often poorly administered and poorly attended by students. Materials that match the laboratory's capabilities are lacking. Equipment performance is often inadequate.

23. Most of the textbooks now in use for FL instruction in colleges do not make provisions for coordinated language laboratory exercises, although most colleges use the drill materials in these texts, incomplete and unsuited as they are for the language laboratory.

24. Little or no attention has been paid to integrating the FL utterances that are practiced into a truly meaningful situational, cultural and "paralinguistic" context. If culture is introduced at all, it is generally unsystematic, anecdotal and not meaningfully related to the FL itself.

25. Students fail to see the relevance of FL instruction to their own needs and goals. Moreover, the goals of the FL requirement are poorly rationalized in terms of superordinate goals, such as "general education." The student who

ascribes to the goals of a liberal arts education can still not see the relevance (for example) of conjugating French verbs, while the increasing numbers of students who do not ascribe to these goals are even more rebellious.

26. One of the patent goals for FL study in college has been meeting the entrance or degree requirements of graduate schools, but these requirements are rapidly disappearing. Of the 46 schools in the Association of Graduate Schools, none have increased and 47% have decreased the FL requirement in the last ten years.

27. For most college students, FL study is a requirement and not an option, and motivation is accordingly poor. This lowers quality, too, since self-selection (a student tends to pick those courses in which he does well) can not operate.

28. The FL requirement may be onerous but it is not extensive enough to reach goals that are intrinsically rewarding. The three "contact-hours" per week per term in most colleges adds up to only a few hours of active student responding in the presence of a teacher, during the student's entire program of FL study!

29. Each FL class distributes its time and effort over such sub-goals as reading, writing, translating, cultural appreciation, and so on. The relative importance of these activities depends, for the teacher, on his training, for the textbook on the author, and for the student on his talents and what use he can imagine for his FL study. Consequently, student priorities and teacher priorities rarely match up, and often match poorly with those implicit in the materials.

30. Exigencies of class scheduling and the like rarely make it possible to organize FL learning with anything like an optimal rhythm and duration of exposure and practice.

31. The inflexibility of the FL requirement loads classes with repeated-fail students who slow the class down and deprive other students of adequate attention.

32. In many state colleges, admissions have been growing without proportionate increases in the faculty engaging in FL instruction. The result is larger classes and diminished opportunity for each student to respond actively in the language, and in other ways to interact with his teacher.

33. Whatever skills in the second language are acquired in high school and college courses, there is little opportunity to utilize these skills in later college years and they degenerate, so that fluency at graduation from college (not to mention graduate school) is very poor indeed.

34. Colleges do not have a vehicle for insuring the adoption of new methods and materials, or even for insuring that they are disseminated to the FL faculty. There are virtually no college-oriented centers for innovations in language teaching, service units primarily that would display new materials, provide training courses in materials development and utilization, and so on.

35. The colleges do not have programs for systematically evaluating their effectiveness in teaching foreign languages.

36. The colleges do not have inter-departmental meetings of FL faculty as a forum for the discussion of new techniques and administrative problems.

Footnote

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